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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a methodology developed to provide undergraduate students with direct experience in the process of impressionistic test interpretation. In the experiential exercise, students were shown Thematic Apperception Test cards and then read the responses given by an anonymous client. A discussion of the process by which the students generated and refined hypotheses relative to the personality of the client is followed by a sampling of student responses to the revelation that the teaching assistant was the personality analyzed. The sensitization process which followed this experience and enabled the students to recognize their tendency to look only for negative aspects of personality is reviewed. Impressions of the teaching assistant and the student are also given. Recommendations are presented for those wishing to employ this teaching method, including a discussion of desirable characteristics of the anonymous client and the methodology that communicates the risks involved when a psychologist attempts to understand an individual from projective productions. (Author/NRB)

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Sensitizing Undergraduates to Potential Inaccuracies in Projective Test Interpretation

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Sensitizing Undergraduates to Potential Inaccuracies in Projective Test Interpretation

Undergraduate courses in Personality, Abnormal, and Tests and Measurements typically devote some time to the discussion of projective testing. These discussions usually focus on the rationale for the use of ambiguous stimuli in assessment, a presentation of research relevant to the validity of such efforts, and, at times, some personal exposure for the student to a projective stimulus. The authors sought to develop a methodology which would supplement such discussion by also providing the students with hands-on experience in the process of impressionistic test interpretation (Cronbach, 1970). The goals of this experience were, first of all, to provide the students with the opportunity to blindly generate and refine hypotheses about an unknown individual from projective test material, and secondly, for them to experience in vivo the accuracy of their interpretations. It was felt that such an experiential exercise would not only introduce the students to the process a clinician goes through in making decisions from projective test results but would also dramatically display the potential success and inaccuracy of predictions made from projective material alone (see Anastasi, 1968, pp. 513 ff. for a review of relevant research). The following methodoloy was devised to achieve these ends.

Prodedure

Students in an undergraduate Personality class at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte were read an anonymous ten-picture Thematic Apperception Test protocol. Students were instructed to imagine that they were clinical psychologists and that their job was to glean as much information as possible from the stories about the unknown test-taker. Whereas emphasis was placed on their creative generation of tentative hypotheses, the final profile resulted from expansions, refinements, and/or deletions of the initial hypotheses.

The students were read descriptions of each TAT card used (Murray, 1943), and then heard the test-taker's projected story. Next, they were encouraged to generate hypotheses which were recorded on the blackboard. With each story, the students discussed the hypotheses, adding some, deleting others, refining existing ones. Disagreements were discussed until a compromise position was reached.

The protocol was really that of a teaching assistant who had frequently attended the class. The personality of the teaching assistant was familiar to the students from his participation in formal and informal discussions as well as from the lectures he gave on several occasions.

After the students completed their test interpretations, they were told that the TAT stories had, in fact, been produced by the teaching assistant. He was then asked to share with the class his feelings about witnessing the process of interpretation and to discuss, from his perspective, the accuracy of each hypotheses generated.

The instructor then discussed with the class conclusions they may have reached about projected testing as a result of this exercise.

Outcome

One version of how this process went can be obtained from the impressions of the teaching assistant:

> When I went into class the first day, I thought I had been prepared for what was going to happen. As the instructor read the first story which I had related in reference to the card, I felt as if that story was appropriate, that I had said what I wanted to say about that scene; I was comfortable with my comments. However, once the class began to generate hypotheses from the story, I found myself feeling more and more anxious. Their hypotheses tended to focus

on the negative aspects of that story and seemed to describe a person who was very ineffective in life. I reassured myself that this was just one story and that as other stories would be read, the class would begin to focus on some of the strengths that exist in my personality. However, this was not the case. Each story was interpreted largely in its negative aspects, and I found myself faced with a blackboard which was filled with statements about me which were terrifying. They described an individual who was extremely weak, who was not successful in life, who was possibly suicidal, who was extremely dependent on other people, who had unresolved difficulties in his relationship with his father, who was extremely passive, who was depressive, who was extremely uncomfortable with aggression--from my perception, a person who unable to function well with other people. I had to acknowledge some truth in these hypotheses and this increased my anxiety. My desire was to get up and run from the classroom, to run from myself. I continued to say, 'Wait. The next story is going to tap the strength; the next story is going to show that this is all wrong.' However, this did not happen.

Once all of the hypotheses had been put on the board, the instructor mentioned that the individual who had taken the test was sitting in the class, and I stood up. As I rose, I noted the amazement on the faces of many of these students. They were as surprised as I was that the person they had been describing was me. I discussed, as openly as I could, each of

the hypotheses that had been generated about me, acknowledging the truth that was in many of them, dismissing a couple of them, amplifying most of them and presenting what I view as more of the totality of my personality. It was a powerful experience for me, and I left the class feeling more certain about myself, much as if I had looked into a well of negative aspects of myself and was strengthened by the renewed awareness that the strengths of my personality far outweigh the negative aspects highlighted by the students.

What did the students learn from this? Later the instructor asked them to write down their impressions. Some of the comments they made were:

- I learned that you can't rely solely on tests like the TAT to determine what an individual needs.
- I learned that one must be careful about arriving at a final evaluation of someone based only on hypotheses derived from the TAT.
- I learned that I have a tendency to prejudge someone to be deficient in certain aspects of his personality. I didn't respond positively to the stories because I felt they were supposed to show things wrong with the person and not his good qualities.
- I felt foolish. I was eager to look at the negative aspects of people. I learned to be more cautious with my opinions. It helped me a lot when the teaching assistant was able to show us he wasn't as crazy as we had pegged him to be.
- The results of the TAT are highly speculative. This type of test does not provide facts to work with, but guesses. If

we had just been told the kinds of results to expect we would not have been as impressed with the hazards of using a test like the TAT.

It was the instructor's impression that the teaching assistant's honest review of the interpretation communicated with great impact several facts about projective testing: that there is almost inescapable tendency to focus on pathology, on the negative; that there is "truth" to be found, but that it is extremely difficult to know when one is on the right track versus picking up on the wrong clues; that certain responses seem logically connected to certain interpretations when there is, in fact, no validity for such conclusions yet an interpreter will cling tenaciously to them (Chapman and Chapman, 1969). Most of all, the exercise seemed to bring home the fact that a projective device can produce a very caricatured picture not nearly as rich as the totality of an individual personality.

Recommendations

Those wishing to involve their students in the process of projective test interpretation may do so, in dramatic fashion, by soliciting the help fo a confederate as described above. It would add to the impact of the exercise if the class has had prior exposure to the confederate. In this way the contrast between their stereotyped interpretation and the fully functioning person they have seen before can be most dramatically conveyed. It is also very important that the confederate be well-adjusted psychologically and aware that he/she will be involved in a possibly stressful experience. Finally, a confederate should be selected who is capable of a good deal of public self-disclosure.

Students are fascinated by projective tests. One can lecture them on the questionable validity of such devices. However, the method described in this article can communicate more effectively than any lecture the risks involved when a psychologist attempts to understand another person from projective productions.

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